The Board of Charities and Public Welfare under Kate Burr Johnson persistently made proposals and budget requests to improve conditions in prisons and on work gangs. Clubs, minor amendments to the child labor law, growth and development of public welfare programs, and improvements to the Meager—specifically for the institution for delinquent black girls established by the North Carolina Federation of Colored Women’s Mother’s Aid program, institutions for juvenile offenders, a farm colony for women offenders, appropriations—though limited training, she was in the forefront of professionalism in a neglected but rapidly emerging field in North Carolina.

Among the achievements either promoted by the board or introduced in North Carolina during her administration were a penal system, children’s and women’s conditions in industry, mental health and hygiene, and public welfare programs. Commissioner Johnson served the state admirably from 1921 to 1930. Her tenure was marked by expansion of the board’s work and staff, its reorganization into specialized bureaus, establishment of new institutions and more effective supervision of existing institutions, increased public and financial support of the board’s activities, and changes in existing laws. Although a Democrat, the commissioner was first a devoted humanitarian and public servant; and, despite her limited training, she was in the forefront of professionalism in a neglected but rapidly emerging field in North Carolina. Under her supervision, studies were made of the problems and deficiencies in the penal system. Effective public relations work aided in gaining support for the board’s programs, to which various women’s organizations gave valuable assistance.

Kate Burr Johnson advocated separating inmates in all North Carolina institutions for criminals, delinquents, mental patients, and public wards into treatable groups by age, sex, and category. She promoted better understanding of the penal system, children’s and women’s conditions in industry, mental health and hygiene, and public welfare programs. Among the achievements either promoted by the board or introduced in North Carolina during her administration were a Mother’s Aid program, institutions for juvenile offenders, a farm colony for women offenders, appropriations—though meager—for the institution for delinquent black girls established by the North Carolina Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, minor amendments to the child labor law, growth and development of public welfare programs, and improvements in conditions in prisons and on work gangs.

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every session of the General Assembly. Frequently aiding her efforts was the Legislative Council of North Carolina Women, a clearinghouse for the legislative activities of seven major women's organizations in the state. A crusader, Mrs. Johnson utilized the Legislative Council, with which she had been affiliated almost from the moment of its inception in 1921, and other kindred groups to marshal pressure on governors and legislators. Although the commissioner herself remained aloof from direct political involvement, the Legislative Council and other organizations with which she was associated were politically active in promoting social justice.

In 1930 she accepted the post of superintendent of the New Jersey State Home for Girls in Trenton. There she continued her work in experimenting with new ideas and approaches. Among her achievements was the creation of a program of work classification for female offenders in New Jersey. She worked with authorities to develop local programs and agencies to deal with a variety of social problems, especially those related to child health and protection. In 1948, at age sixty-seven, she retired and returned to her home in Raleigh, where her career had begun decades before.

Over the years Kate Burr Johnson won national attention. She was either a member of or appointed to the American Association of Social Workers, National Probation Association, National Conference of Juvenile Agencies, New Jersey Conference of Social Work, American Prison Association, Executive Committee of the Child Welfare League of America, Business and Professional Women's Club, and American Academy of Social Sciences. From 1948 to 1953 she served on the North Carolina Prison Advisory Commission. In 1951 she was awarded the doctor of humane letters by the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, and in 1954, the North Carolina Distinguished Service Award for Women by the Epsilon Beta chapter of Chi Omega fraternity.

Mrs. Johnson died at the Mayview Convalescent Home in Raleigh and was interred at the city's Oakwood Cemetery.

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Additional Resources:
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http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/special/ead/findingaids/0091/

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